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TRANSCRIPT OF SENATOR THE HON. ARTHUR SINODINOS AO
INTERVIEW WITH PATRICIA KARVELAS, RN DRIVE

Subjects: Cory Bernardi, same-sex marriage, energy policy, Alan Finkel, Turnbull donation, Parliament sitting

E&OE.....

PATRICIA KARVELAS

Senator Arthur Sinodinos is the Minister for Industry, Innovation, and Science, welcome back to RN Drive.

ARTHUR SINODINOS

Thanks Patricia, good to be with you.

PATRICIA KARVELAS

So tonight, what is your message to Cory Bernardi, who is defecting from your party?

ARTHUR SINODINOS

Well I don't know what Cory is going to do. I used to share an office on the same floor of the Senate as Cory, and often used to take tea with him. He's a good fellow, I like him, and like all good Liberals I'd like him to be in the Liberal Party, but I'm not speculating what will happen tomorrow. The press seem to be going on with speculation, but that's not my job.

PATRICIA KARVELAS

He hasn't come out to contradict the stories, it's quite obvious this is what he plans to do. Have you had tea with him today?

ARTHUR SINODINOS

No I haven't seen him today, but mind you I've been in other meetings. We'll wait and see.

PATRICIA KARVELAS

The breakaway is a big problem for your Government. How did it come to this? Why couldn't you keep Senator Bernardi in the church of the Liberal Party, in the broad church of the Liberal Party?

ARTHUR SINODINOS

Well you're asking me to speculate about the motives of someone who has as yet not announced what they're doing, if they're going to do anything. The only point I'd make about the Liberal Party is that, you know, it's a broad church, which is something that John Howard and others have said for a long time, with its liberal and conservative tributaries, and as far as I'm concerned, it remains a pretty broad church under Malcolm Turnbull.

PATRICIA KARVELAS

Clearly Cory Bernardi doesn't think it's broad enough.

ARTHUR SINODINOS

Well you'll have to ask Cory that question.

PATRICIA KARVELAS

If he does defect tomorrow, and as I say, he's certainly planning to defect, is this Malcolm Turnbull's failure? You were John Howard's chief of staff; would a leader like Howard have been able to keep Bernardi in the party?

ARTHUR SINODINOS

Well I don't know what Cory is going to do. The one thing I will say is, working alongside Malcolm Turnbull as I have since he became Prime Minister, and watching him in the Cabinet, he's been very concerned to make sure that all tributaries of the Liberal Party have their say when it comes to policy, and I think he's demonstrated that by the way he's sought to bring various groups together. Sometimes that's brought criticism of him from some people who may want him to be more on the left, and some people who want him to be more on the right, but the fact is he's weaved his way through in a way which is consistent with trying to be the leader of a broad church.

PATRICIA KARVELAS

He's weaved his way through, yet his Newspoll polling is plummeting. So clearly he's doing something that isn't working.

ARTHUR SINODINOS

Patricia I think what we're seeing in Newspoll, and what we're seeing in relation to all major parties is that there's no doubt that the established political parties are going to have to do more to get back some of those uncommitted voters or people who feel marginalised. That's a challenge; it's an opportunity, but I'm not going to slash my wrists over it. We've got work to do to convince people who may not be convinced at the moment that we've got the best policies in terms of the economy, more jobs and all the rest of it, so I'm not complacent about any of that. You use the polls as a wakeup call to make yourself determined to do things better, to be more responsive to people's concerns. That's what we're doing with things like entitlements; zero tolerance for abuse of entitlements. That's why Malcolm Turnbull had the courage to set up the Independent Parliamentary Expenses Authority, our first leader to commit to something like that, and I think messages like that to the community are going to be very important in the period ahead to show politicians are meeting community standards

in their own behaviour, as well as seeking to focus on the issues that are of most concern to the people out there.

PATRICIA KARVELAS

Given that Cory Bernardi wants to do this, begin a new conservative force, really a rival also to your party and One Nation, should your policies shift to the right to keep conservatives in the party room on side? I'll give you an example: should you take a tougher line on Muslims and Islam? Because that's one of the crucial elements of the agenda that Cory Bernardi has been pushing.

ARTHUR SINODINOS

It's not a matter of a shift to the right or a shift to the left, it's a matter of always being responsive to the needs and concerns of people out there. So if people may have shifted to One Nation because they have particular grievances, our job is to examine those grievances, deal with them and bring those voters back. You don't write any voter off. We'll accept people who are lapsed Liberal voters who may have voted Greens, we want them back as well...

PATRICIA KARVELAS

Sure, but you're not going to get them back, according to Cory Bernardi, with the policies you have. So do you need to change some of those policies. Do you believe in having a tougher line on some of those issues, including as I say, Muslims and Islam?

ARTHUR SINODINOS

Well if you're asking me specifically in relation to some of those policies on border protection, they're pretty strong, we have pretty strong vetting of people who come to Australia. In fact our border protection policies are now getting a lot of attention around the world because of their perceived effectiveness, and, also, we are a multicultural country with a non-discriminatory immigration policy, we vet people from every part of the world to make sure they've got the right character, and the right characteristics to come here. So I think we have great credentials to burnish in this area, so it's not a matter of jumping right or left, it's about having the right policies, and the right policies are policies which deal specifically with the bread and butter issues that affect people's daily lives. That's what Turnbull, that's what this Government is about. It's about jobs, it's about the right sort of jobs in the areas where people want to live and work.

PATRICIA KARVELAS

On the issue of same sex marriage, do you agree with Tony Abbott that a free vote on same sex marriage would break an election promise?

ARTHUR SINODINOS

In relation to promises, my view has always been, and this is the plea I make to the Senate: please let us keep our promises; whether it's on the plebiscite on same sex marriage, whether it's our promises on cutting company tax to generate more jobs...

PATRICIA KARVELAS

So do you agree that it is an election promise that you must keep the position of a plebiscite for this entire term?

ARTHUR SINODINOS

Well, I would like us to be able to meet that promise, and I'm asking the Labor Party, crossbenchers and others to help us keep our promises. We have – let's get rid of this hypocrisy in politics where you have people ask you to keep certain promises and then break others. What we're asking people is to allow us to keep our promises and to be judged by the results.

PATRICIA KARVELAS

So isn't your message to your own backbench the same? Because Coalition MPs want to bring on a free vote, I've spoken to some of them – of course, off the record at this stage. They want to bring on a free vote. So, isn't your message to your own party?

ARTHUR SINODINOS

Well, my message is to everybody in the Parliament. Let's work together for the Government to keep its promises, and then, by all means, the Government be judged on the result.

PATRICIA KARVELAS

Malcolm Turnbull has said he's prepared to discuss establishing a domestic gas reserve as part of his new energy security push. Now, of course, it's quite politically fraught. What's your timeframe for this?

ARTHUR SINODINOS

Oh, I don't think we're talking about a domestic reservation policy in the sense of one that, if you like, discourages exploration and development of gas. I think he was alluding to the fact that some states like Queensland have decided to reserve some new areas, some prospective areas, for domestic production and consumption. But what we're essentially concerned about is a situation where we want to get the moratoria on gas exploration lifted in places like Victoria, we want to talk to the States about how you incentivise the players, which includes farmers, and align their interests more with the interests of energy producers and developers, because that's in the interests of the community as a whole. But the thing we can't do is have a policy which effectively diminishes the potential supply of gas – and that will be to the detriment of not only our export income, but our domestic industry development.

PATRICIA KARVELAS

And your plans for clean coal power stations have really suffered a blow. The industry says there's no appetite to invest in such plans. How can you go ahead with something that the industry says that there's no case for?

ARTHUR SINODINOS

The Prime Minister made the point the other day that, going forward, we should have a technology-agnostic approach to how we achieve lower emissions. We're trying to do three things here. We're trying to promote energy security, energy affordability, and reducing our greenhouse gas emissions in line with our Paris targets. And the whole point is to have an approach where, if a technology helps you to reduce your emissions and assist you with energy security and energy affordability, we should be able to look at that on all fours with other technologies.

PATRICIA KARVELAS

But over the past decade, major generators have actually shelved plans to develop new coal-fired generation.

ARTHUR SINODINOS

And all we're saying is: going forward, let's have a technology-agnostic approach in the framework of reducing our emissions; and then let the market, if you like, sort out which technologies get up and in what context. The reason we're having this debate now is that the blackouts in places like South Australia have highlighted the issue of energy security as we transition to an electricity and an energy system more reliant on renewables, which have problems when it comes to storage of supply. So you get these discontinuities in supply, and the system has to be able to cope with this. So the real cost of renewables has to take into account the backup that's required to maintain stability of baseload power in the system.

PATRICIA KARVELAS

Australia's Chief Scientist, Alan Finkel – now, you're Science Minister – has compared US President Donald Trump's move to censor environmental data with former Soviet dictator Stalin's control of science in the USSR. He says science is under attack. Do you agree with him?

ARTHUR SINODINOS

Look, Alan Finkel is a good man, and a very good Chief Scientist, and an independent source of advice to the Government on all matters scientific. When it comes to our relationship with the US, well, that's a matter for the Government. And we see that relationship through the prism of our national interest. And that will continue to be the case – that Dr Finkel doesn't speak for the Government when it comes to relations with the US.

PATRICIA KARVELAS

Do you think it's appropriate, then – he is our Chief Scientist – to compare the new President with Stalin?

ARTHUR SINODINOS

I think what's appropriate for Alan Finkel to continue doing what he's been doing, which is to provide strong, evidence-based advice to the Government on scientific matters going forward.

PATRICIA KARVELAS

So, you don't criticise him for comparing the new President to Stalin?

ARTHUR SINODINOS

Look, he doesn't speak for the Government, he is an independent source of advice. The thing I will say about science in the current age is that I am very keen for us to promote science for the fact-based way in which it operates. That's very important. Alan Finkel is a strong proponent of that, and so am I.

PATRICIA KARVELAS

So you won't criticise him?

ARTHUR SINODINOS

Look, I told you before, Dr Finkel doesn't speak for the Government. I'm not in the business of criticising or not criticising. These are separate matters.

PATRICIA KARVELAS

Fair enough. The Prime Minister, we know, has defended his \$1.75 million donation to the Liberal Party. He says the Party was so broke that it couldn't pay the Federal Director Tony Nutt for several months. But this afternoon, Tony Abbott has said: 'Due to the good work of the Director and office-bearers, the Party was always able to meet its costs in my time as leader.' How do you interpret that? So, you know, he paid Tony Nutt when he was the leader, just not when Malcolm Turnbull was the leader.

ARTHUR SINODINOS

Well, Tony wasn't employed when Tony Abbott was the Prime Minister and Leader of the Liberal Party.

PATRICIA KARVELAS

But the idea that office-bearers – the office-bearers could be paid under Tony Abbott but not under Malcolm Turnbull, why would that be the case?

ARTHUR SINODINOS

Well, look, I don't know the facts of the matter. All I will say is: I am aware of what the Prime Minister said last night, I won't go any further than that. And I'm not going to get into that debate.

PATRICIA KARVELAS

Alright, Parliament sits tomorrow, and you've got a major headache. I mean, is the fact that Cory Bernardi's going to resign going to derail your plans for the week?

ARTHUR SINODINOS

Our plans will continue because we're focused on jobs and bread-and-butter issues for our fellow Australians.

PATRICIA KARVELAS

He's hijacking the agenda, isn't he? It makes it impossible for you to prosecute the agenda when he's taking all the oxygen out of the debate?

ARTHUR SINODINOS

Well, not if we and the press focus on what's important to our fellow Australians.

PATRICIA KARVELAS

How about what you do, and how you manage your own party? You can't blame the press for what's going on in your own party?

ARTHUR SINODINOS

Yes, but by the same token, the decisions of one individual are not necessarily the fault or the responsibility of others.

PATRICIA KARVELAS

Thank you so much for your time this evening.

ARTHUR SINODINOS

Thanks, Patricia.